

DOC evaluates 'release options' after employees test positive for COVID-19 at prisons, including Airway Heights

UPDATED: Wed., April 8, 2020

By [Chad Sokol](#)

Spokesman Review

Washington's Department of Corrections now has a dozen employees who have tested positive for COVID-19, including a staffer at the Airway Heights Corrections Center, fueling concerns about the potential for a severe outbreak in the state prison system.

According to [DOC figures released Tuesday evening](#), there are confirmed cases among employees at Airway Heights, the Coyote Ridge Corrections Center, the Washington Corrections Center, the Monroe Correctional Complex, a work-release facility in Kitsap County and one of the agency's headquarters.

Three staffers have tested positive at Monroe, which also [reported its first case of COVID-19 in a prisoner on Monday](#). The DOC said the man is housed in a minimum-security unit and was placed in a single-person cell after returning from a local hospital. The unit has been placed on quarantine, and staff members have been ordered to wear protective face masks.

The DOC said it had tested 204 incarcerated people as of Tuesday; 58 of those tests were still pending and 145 had come back negative.

The agency said 172 prisoners were in isolation Tuesday for showing possible symptoms of COVID-19, while 1,175 were in quarantine because they had been exposed to someone known to have COVID-19 or another contagious disease.

Civil liberties groups have called for the emergency release of prisoners during the COVID-19 pandemic, contending it's only a matter of time before the new coronavirus spreads through Washington's prison facilities. They say it's difficult, if not impossible, for prisoners to practice effective social distancing.

Late last month, Columbia Legal Services [filed a lawsuit on behalf of five inmates with underlying medical conditions](#) that make them especially vulnerable to COVID-19, saying they and thousands of others should be released. The state Supreme Court is expected to hear oral arguments on the case on April 23.

In an email Tuesday, DOC spokeswoman Janelle Guthrie said the agency is "evaluating the three statutorily sanctioned release options available to our agency." Those options,

she said, include furloughs, releases for serious medical issues and “graduated reentry,” a program that moves people from prison into work-release, and then into electronic home monitoring, also known as house arrest.

“We are actively working to evaluate all available options for continuing to ensure the safety and health of our incarcerated population,” Guthrie said. “It is important that the decisions we make are done with recognition that we are part of a global health crisis and limit the impacts to other critical community systems who are engaged in the larger public health response.”

Joseph Swanson has been incarcerated at Airway Heights for about a year. The 36-year-old was convicted of residential burglary and drug possession after stealing a valuable painting and an Amazon Fresh delivery from an apartment building in Seattle.

He’s also HIV-positive and fears a COVID-19 diagnosis would amount to a death sentence. He had anticipated starting work-release this month under the graduated reentry program, but now he and his attorney hope he can avoid setting foot in a work-release facility.

“Given Joe’s health concerns, I am exploring options for allowing him to move onto electronic home monitoring sooner,” Colleen O’Connor, a King County public defender, said in an email.

In phone calls from the prison over the past week, Swanson said Airway Heights staff members have made some significant changes, including delivering food in to-go boxes and staggering recreational periods so all prisoners from his unit don’t gather at one time.

But he said many prisoners still interact closely and gather around tables to play cards. He also expressed concern that correctional officers don’t wear face masks. And he said that many prisoners – who can’t follow news about the pandemic very closely from inside the prison – don’t seem to understand how severe the illness can be.

“Everybody thinks it’s a joke,” Swanson said. “Nobody’s taking it seriously.”

Guthrie, the DOC spokeswoman, said the agency has implemented screening and other precautions, stepped up cleaning and increased prisoners’ access to hand soap and sanitation products. Additionally, she said prison staff members have been instructed to encourage 6-foot social distancing wherever possible.

“This is a priority for the agency, and we continue to educate the population when we witness it not occurring,” she said.